

# US continues assaults on Iraqi militants

REUTERS, Baghdad

US-led forces yesterday pressed on with a major offensive against suspected guerrilla targets near the northern Iraqi town of Samarra in their latest bid to weaken a raging insurgency, witnesses said.

The raids came as Iraq's political leadership prepares to meet again in an effort to break a deadlock on forming a unity government that might avert civil war.

Involving 50 helicopters, it was the biggest "air assault" since a similar airlift across Iraq, also by the 101st Airborne Division, just after the war in late April 2003, US military officials said.

Iraqi Defence Ministry spokesman General Salih Sarhan criticized the attention being given to the assault, describing it as one of many operations aimed at rooting out rebels and seizing weapons.

"This operation is not an invasion and the media have overreacted. The operation aims to search and control the area and launch raids against some suspected places," he said.

The sound of what appeared to be heavy US machineguns cracked in the village of Jillaam overnight as a fire raged and flames arched overhead, the witnesses said.

The chant of "God is Greatest" - a guerrilla rallying cry - cut through the heavy sound of gunfire.

But there was no sign of a counter attack by insurgents who have kept Iraq destabilised despite several American assaults in several parts of the country torn apart by sectarian

## US rules out

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Burns told reporters.

"We see an Iranian government, particularly since (President Mahmoud) Ahmadinejad came to office, that seems bold and determined to create a nuclear weapons capability," he added.

"We have made the calculation ... that it is better to try to isolate the Iranian government."

Burns said he was confident that the UN Security Council will succeed in reaching agreement on appropriate action against Iran.

A State Department official said Burns and his counterparts from China, Russia, France, Britain, and Germany would meet in New York on Monday to try and break the deadlock on Iran.

"They plan to finalize the presidential statement on Iran," the official, who requested anonymity, told AFP. He was referring to efforts by the five permanent members of the Security Council, who have veto power, to reach consensus on a statement condemning Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Any such statement needs to be approved by all 15 members of the Council. Iran says its nuclear ambitions are peaceful and denies it is seeking nuclear weapons.

Earlier Thursday, both the US and Iran expressed willingness to engage in discussions about the situation in Iraq.

McClellan said the US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, was

## Niko flouting rules

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ministry but no action has been taken so far.

The Canadian company has not also been punished for the pipeline scam although a Petrobangla probe committee found gross anomalies in the deal, including the way it secured Titus company's pipes which were purchased for the Asian Development Bank (ADB)-funded Dhaka Clean Fuel Project. Niko later paid Titus for the pipes but in local currency while the pipes were procured with foreign currency.

During Niko's pipeline construction, Tengratila gas field was burning due to a blowout, and within a month of construction of the pipeline, a second blowout took place. Again, the pipeline itself is not even suitable for high-pressure gas supply as required from a gas field point. It has been a total waste of money that Niko plans to retrieve from Tengratila's development cost in future.

Besides, Niko has illegally purchased land around the Feni gas field area for future development, chopped over 500 trees there and has done different work 'in advance', sources mentioned.

The company has done similar 'advance' work at Tengratila or Chhatat gas field. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) recently approved a \$10-million work programme of Niko for Tengratila gas field. Sources said most of the work has 'already been done' and a large chunk of the recently granted money was spent last year.

"No activities of Niko is transparent. We have received allegations from Bapex that Niko does not take approval of the Joint Review Committee (JRC) or the Joint Management Committee (JMC) for

tensions.

A Sunni Arab politician criticised the US assault, saying it would send a discouraging signal at a time when Iraqi leaders are seeking a political solution to the country's woes.

"This large operation that used airplanes is sending a signal to parliament and Iraqis that the solution is military and not political," he said.

It was not clear if US and Iraqi troops had also attacked other parts of their target area northeast of Samarra.

The city 100km north of the capital where the destruction of an important Shia Muslim shrine on February 22 sparked days of reprisals and prompted fears of civil war.

The military also said 41 insurgents had been detained and weapons had been found in "Operation Swarmer" and that the mission would last for several days.

The assault was announced on Thursday after a first session of the new Iraqi parliament was reduced to an empty gesture by deadlock on forming a unity government seen as vital to avert civil war.

Signs of movement to end the paralysis did emerge, however, when US and Iranian officials said they could set aside years of hostility to discuss Iraq. And Iraqi political sources said a new alliance of parties may be formed in hope of a breakthrough.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebani was quick to portray the military operation as proof of the growing abilities of Iraqi troops key to US hopes of bringing home troops.

Urging the formation of a unity government, the US commander in

"authorized to speak with Iranians about issues specifically related to Iraq."

If US-Iranian negotiations were to occur on Iraq or any subject, it would be the first direct talks since Washington broke ties with Tehran in April 1980 in the wake of the Islamic revolution that ousted the US-backed Shah, and since some 70 Americans were taken hostage at the US embassy in Tehran.

The last time the two sides sat at the same table was in 2001 in a room with seven other countries, including Russia, for discussions about Afghanistan.

Until now, the arch-rivals have resisted a dialogue on Iraq, despite Iran's strong ties to the major Shia parties who dominate Baghdad's political scene, and the growing violence that threatens to rip Iraq apart.

Deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said the discussions with Tehran on the Iraq issue would likely focus on concerns expressed in the past by the US administration that Iran was seeking to undermine its efforts in Iraq.

"Iran is doing things in Iraq that we don't think are helpful or supportive of Iraq," Ereli said. "Ambassador Khalilzad is authorized to raise those matters directly with the Iranians in Iraq."

any of its activities," said an energy ministry official.

According to Niko's joint venture agreement (JVA) with Bapex, which provided the Canadian company gateway to three gas fields of Feni, Kamta and Chhatat, all its work programmes should be approved by the JRC and the JMC consisting of Bapex and Niko officials.

The JVA also dictates that all payments should go to a joint bank account of Niko and Bapex. But Niko influenced the then state minister for energy to force Petrobangla to pay \$4 million to it (Niko's) bank account in April 2005.

The Feni gas field controversy itself has been a creation of the previous state minister, who forced Petrobangla to start taking gas from this field in November 2004 without fixing gas price. The state minister also pressurised Petrobangla to pay Niko \$2.35 per unit of gas while Petrobangla found the Feni gas was worth a maximum of \$1.75 per unit.

The October 2003 Niko-Bapex JVA was made on the basis of unsolicited negotiation and in violation of a number of government policies. Niko was disqualified by the government in the Second Round Block Bidding for oil and gas exploration under PSCs in 1997.

Niko's inefficient and negligent operation led to two blowouts in Tengratila gas field last year. The government demanded 8.9 bcf gas and a bank guarantee of Tk 250 crore as blowout compensation and for further drilling there. Niko is yet to respond to this demand.

the Middle East said the United States should be able to continue to cut its own troop levels if Iraqi forces show progress.

"I think the general trend, given legitimate government emerging, will be Iraqis do more, we do less, and eventually more reductions come about," General John Abizaid said.

The action at Samarra contrasted to the 20-minute formality that it is essential to take a countrywide river training plan, especially setting up embankments on both sides of these rivers as in China.

"We realise its importance but we cannot take up such huge projects due to budget constraint," he told The Daily Star, stressing the need for more budgetary allocation for his ministry.

Experts suggested that the authority first identify the probable erosion prone points one year in advance to facilitate planning of necessary monitoring and maintenance against possible adversities to the safety of the riverbanks.

The government should also consult with neighbouring India in this regard, said Dr M Monowar Hossain, professor of water resources engineering department at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet).

He also stressed the need for learning the behaviour of the rivers through proper research and large-scale surveys.

The Water Development Board (WDB) constructs a number of embankments in different parts of the country every year. But these structures can hardly survive the force of erosion let alone protect the banks as they are built mostly during the rainy season.

"The WDB knows that it needs some time for the embankments to get hardened, yet they do the construction work during the rainy season. This is nothing but a sheer waste of resources. The best time for the work is winter," Monowar added.

Protection measures taken by the government have not lasted long as all such measures were taken without proper planning and

operation. He, however, declined to divulge the identity of the two.

"The first bomb went off before time near some policemen. And minutes after, the other suicide bomber carried out the attack successfully," Saimul quoted Rahman as saying.

He said Mawa is the main den of militants in greater Mymensingh region and over 200 JMB operatives led by Moulana Abdur Razzak are still active there.

"Although my men arrested Sanaullah and Sumon, we've failed to net the others due to non-cooperation of Gouripur police," added the police officer.

He said police will interrogate Bangla Bhai too in this connection once the doctors release him from hospital.

Some three months ago, a group of Iranian soldiers was kidnapped near the border with Pakistan by a hardline Sunni Muslim group operating in the unruly border area. They were later released.

Iranian officials and media had initially said the kidnappers were bandits, drug traffickers or dissident tribesmen.

## Tax barriers

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underway.

Bangladesh will encourage such moves, he observed.

Asked about Dhaka's view on the proposed India-Myanmar gas pipeline through Bangladesh, Hemayatuddin said the matter would be discussed if it is raised at the meeting between Khaleeda and Singh.

On the possibility of cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the field of energy considering that that country has large gas reserves, he cited his country's rapidly growing energy requirements because of fast paced economic growth.

"We have to decide how much we need. Then whoever offers a price, we will be ready to sell," he said, adding it was not a country-specific.

He said the Indo-Bangla relations went beyond economic ties and noted the two neighbours have throughout been living cordially despite some "minor" disputes.

With regard to reports of rising fundamentalism in the country, Hemayatuddin said Bangladesh would not allow extremist elements to survive and a campaign had already started against them.

India is likely to raise its concerns with regard to 'existence of North East insurgent camps in Bangladesh' and 'illegal migration from the country'.

The entire gamut of India-Bangladesh relations, including border issue, security-related matters, trade and sharing of water of common rivers, would be discussed when Khaleeda

holds talks with Indian Premier Manmohan Singh on March 21, said the Bangladesh foreign secretary.

Khaleeda Zia will be accompanied by among others Foreign Minister Morshed Khan, Finance Minister M Saiful Rahman, Foreign Affairs Adviser to the Prime Minister Reaz Rahman, and a business delegation.

## No river training plan

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the riverbeds and thus is decreasing the navigability of these rivers.

The government, however, is yet to take any long-term master plan and proper strategy for "river training" to protect the riverbanks from erosion, causing most of its measures to go wasted.

"River training" mainly aims at modelling the proper river flow regime facilitating bank protection, channel flow, navigation and other aspects through dredging and other methods.

Water Resources Minister Hafiz Uddin Ahmed admitted that it is essential to take a countrywide river training plan, especially setting up embankments on both sides of these rivers as in China.

"We realise its importance but we cannot take up such huge projects due to budget constraint," he told The Daily Star, stressing the need for more budgetary allocation for his ministry.

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## Bombs blasted

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According to first information reports (FIR) of two cases, Sufal and Sushanta of Chaptia village have been missing since they were abducted by cadres of Bangla Bhai on May 12 and 13 in 2004.

Fathers of the two youths filed the cases 22 months after the incidents.

Rafiqul Islam of Vote village in Raninagar filed the other case against Bangla Bhai and his vigilante gang for maiming him on April 15, 2004.

**BANGLA BHAI YET TO BE QUIZZED**

Meanwhile, the investigators have yet to begin quizzing Siddiqul Islam alias Bangla Bhai, JMB Shura member and lieutenant of the militant chief. He is still undergoing treatment at Bangladesh Rifles hospital in Dhaka for burns and other injuries he sustained during his capture in Rampur village of Muktagachha, Mymensingh on March 6.

Sources in the Rab said he will be taken to Mymensingh and produced before a court to be placed on remand.

"Doctors are yet to release him. We thought he would be released by Thursday but he was not," Commander Masuq Hassan Ahmed, director of Rab Legal and Media Wing, told The Daily Star.

On getting a remand order from court, members of the Task Force for Interrogation (TFI) will interrogate him at Rab-1 office in Uttara.

The TFI members have been continuing quizzing Rahman under a 10-day remand, Commander Masuq added.

**BANGLA BHAI'S WIFE REMANDED FURTHER**

Bangla Bhai's wife Fahima Khatun, arrested a couple of

strategy, experts observed. Most of the protection measures become extinct within two to five years.

Jamuna-Meghna River Erosion Mitigation Project (JMREMP) team leader Knut Oberhagemann said the local WDB sends the proposals for protection measures to the water resources ministry after the erosion has already started. "It takes around one to five years to get the proposals approved. But in the meantime, the erosion point has shifted to elsewhere," he said.

"It is very disappointing that most of the river protection steps taken by the government are wasted due to bureaucratic tangle," Knut said.

The experts have, meanwhile, found that the Jamuna, Padma and lower Meghna have been undergoing dynamic changes since the last decade. A CEGIS study of a temporal series of satellite images found that these rivers are widening at a very high annual rate, ranging between 160m and 250m.

**THE JAMUNA**

The upper part of the 240km-long Jamuna from the Indo-Bangladesh border to Kazipur of Sirajganj has been widening at a rate of around 150m a year while the lower part from Kazipur to the confluence with the Padma near Aricha has been widening around 140m a year since 1973.

The Jamuna eroded 87,790 hectare land over the last three decades while the total amount of land accretion was 12,490 hectare.

**THE PADMA**

The total erosion by the 90km-long Padma during this period was 29,390 hectare while land accretion was 4,800 hectare.

During 2001-2004, the Padma alone eroded the rural area along its 30.7km banks, engulfing 3,300 hectares of land--260 hectares of settlement and 1,200 hectare agricultural land, according to the CEGIS report.

**THE LOWER MEGHNA**

Around 24,137 hectare land was eroded along the 90km banks of the lower Meghna from Chandpur to the northern tip of Hatia during 1984-2003 while land accretion was just 1,936 hectare. The river widened 169m on average per year, the CEGIS survey mentioned.

hours before the capture of his husband, was placed on a 12-day fresh remand by a Mymensingh court yesterday, reports our Mymensingh correspondent.

On completion of a 10-day remand at the TFI, Fahima was produced before the court of First Class Magistrate Rokshana Tarannum.

The court ordered the law enforcers to interrogate her for seven days in explosives case and five days in arms case. Both the cases were filed with Muktagachha Police Station after Rab captured Bangla Bhai and recovered huge firearms and explosives from Rampur.

**BRAHMANBARIA PROBE**

Police yesterday picked up Shafiqul Islam from Kautoli area of Brahmanbaria town for suspected links with militants.

Shafiq was held after four JMB activists of the district, who were captured Wednesday, told interrogators that he knows a lot about JMB activities and network.

The police continued interrogating the four -- Sohel, Alamgir, Arafat and Sheikh Mohammad -- on the second day of their five-day remand yesterday.

**NILPHAMARI ARREST**  
Domar police of Nilphamari yesterday arrested field-level JMB activist Abdul Jalil at Pramanikpara, acting on the information obtained from two JMB activists rounded up Wednesday by the BDR, our Nilphamari correspondent adds.

Nilphamari SP Shobeb Ahmed said all three arrestees have given some significant information.

## Caretaker system

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Workers Party chief Rashed Khan Menon stressed putting the armed forces under the caretaker government during its tenure, as proposed by the 14-party opposition combine. Otherwise, the election will be manipulated, he added.

Former US ambassador to Bangladesh William B Milam, who was scheduled to talk on the issue, could not do so on health grounds. In a message, he said, "Free and fair elections are critically important for the future of democracy in Bangladesh and for the whole region."

Milam, now a senior policy scholar at Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington, hoped all the parties will come together to ensure that the process of democracy continues to take a deeper root in Bangladesh.

Others who spoke included BILIA Director Wali-ur-Rahman and Forest E Cookson, economist at Research and Development Centre.

## Bangladesh cross 300-run

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After South Africa's historic run-chase against Australia last week no total looks defendable these days but the Bangladeshi bowlers were too good for the ICC associate members and ensured normalcy return in the shorter-version game.

Left-arm seamer Syed Rasel initiated an early collapse picking up three wickets and Kenya never recovered before being dismissed for 170 in 48.10 overs.

Although Nafees and Aftab set the platform, it was Mashrafe Bin Mortuza whose stunning fireworks enabled Bangladesh to cross the 300-mark for the first time and claim their twelfth ODI win second against the East Africans in eight meetings.

The 22-year old pace bowler, popularly known as the Nail Express, took only 16 balls to score his highest one-day total of 44 not out that contained five fours and three massive sixes against Jimmy

Ongondo, who conceded 23 runs in the last over. Mashrafe's explosive knock, which helped Bangladesh rattle 101 runs in the last nine overs, came agonisingly close to equal Sri Lankan opener Sanath Jayasuriya's one-day record of a 17-ball fifty.

Earlier, lady luck once again smiled on Habibul Bashar as the Bangladesh captain maintained his hundred percent coin successes since Sri Lanka's tour and decided to bat first on a true batting track.

On a true batting track, Bangladesh a flying start putting on 92 runs but the former fell to a doubtful third-umpire decision when Steve Tikolo palmed the ball at cover. TV replays were inconclusive whether the ball had carried.

Javed's departure after a sedate 53-ball 28, however, seemed to be a blessing as Aftab accelerated the run-rate with his natural stroke-play during a 69-ball 62 with help of three fours and two sixes.

Left-handed opener Nafees was unlucky to fall nine runs short of what would have been his maiden one-day hundred when the man-of-the-match failed to return to the non-striking while trying to steal a single against Tikolo's perfect throw.

The southpaw, who surpassed his previous best of 75 against Australia capitalising the power play advantage superbly, smashed eleven well-timed fours in his 112 ball innings.

Bashar decision to not come out and send Mohammad Rafique at number five proved a wise decision as the veteran left-hander responded with three fours and a six to score 36 off 25 balls.

The two teams meet in the second game in Khulna on March 20.

## Probe if anyone in govt

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these groups."

Last year, Abu Hena, a BNP lawmaker, was reportedly expelled after he accused some government ministers of fostering the rise of Bangla Bhai in his constituency in northern Bagmara Upazila, the statement said.

"I tried to stop them and I wanted help from the government but some ministers and some MPs, for their own political advantages, did not want to stop the Islamic extremists," the internationally reputed human rights organisation quoted Hena.

It is the responsibility of the government to investigate anyone against whom there are allegations of involvement in the bombings, including the two top bosses of JMB, with a view to establishing the truth, the statement said.

"However, such investigation must at all times conform to international human rights standards and be free from any act of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment," the statement continued.

"The investigation must extend to anyone in the government or (to anyone) linked to the ruling coalition parties [who were] likely to have provided political shelter to the bombers for personal or political gains," it said.

"If those investigated can be charged, they should be brought to justice in compliance with international fair trial standards, without recourse to the death penalty."

According to media reports, the government has now admitted that

politically motivated.

"They were reportedly ill-treated while in police custody and had a series of unsubstantiated criminal charges framed against them. They have claimed that they were being forced to confess to involvement in the Mymensingh bomb blasts, a charge they have always refuted, the statement said.

"Their detention and the government's persistent denial that the blasts appeared to be not only a move by the government to intimidate its critics, but also helped to divert the course of justice and, effectively, provided impunity from prosecution to the actual perpetrators of the bomb blasts," it said.

Al urged the Government of Bangladesh to provide full redress to the falsely accused and other people who were subjected to politically motivated detentions during that time. Such redress should in the first instance include the withdrawal of the charges against them, including sedition charges, it added.

Al also urged the government to recognise that under international human rights law, anyone who has been a victim of unlawful arrest or detention shall have an enforceable right to compensation.

## 40 injured as storm lashes

### Kalaroa

UNB, Sathkhira

Huda told The Daily Star.

"We are trying at least to start the process," he said.

According to sources, since assuming power in 2001 the four-party alliance government has been seeking foreign investment for under-ground railway to relieve the city dwellers of nagging traffic congestion.

The Russian ambassador to Bangladesh had called on the communications minister and said the country wanted to assist Bangladesh in developing an underground railway in the city. A technical team from Russia had visited Dhaka to examine the technical aspects of the project.

Bangladesh Railway had opened an international tender in February 2003, seeking proposals from foreign companies to set up the railway on BOT basis.

Only two companies had submitted proposals in the tender. But the government could not go far with the plan as both the proposals were non-responsive.

Out of the two proposals, one was submitted by a local company and the other by an American company. The local Contech Ltd had proposed to build a 45-kilometre underground single circular rail track from Saidabad to Gabtoli at a cost of Tk 2,000 crore.

The American company had quoted Tk 6,000 crore for the job, but it did not elaborate on its proposal, said a communications ministry official.

"We did not get any response from the American company when we sought details of the proposal," said a high official of